

*Change of topic*

## EROTIC SELF-IMAGES IN THE GAY MALE AIDS MELODRAMA

(version for "AIDS: Crisis & Criticism", London, Ont., Nov 11-13, 1988)

At an American gay studies conference last month, a "gays in the media" panel, of the kind ~~we have~~ <sup>that have</sup> become second nature to lesbians and gays over the last two decades, three scholars in a row embarked on familiar tirades against the made-for-TV gay melodrama, focusing principally on AN EARLY FROST, one of the earlier major fictional representations of AIDS on the U.S. commercial networks. It is a movie we all have come to love ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> hate, but one over which we all secretly wept copious tears. The panelists were of course correct in their criticism of AN EARLY FROST and I am certainly not about to defend it or the made-for-TV <sup>network</sup> melodrama. Yet, in their blanket dismissal of the melodrama per se, I think the panelists were involved in a somewhat careless, ahistoric and even elitist negation of the heritage and current arsenal of gay popular culture. In this paper I would like to defend that much stigmatized genre, melodrama, which has in fact been the format for the most important gay male cultural responses to the epidemic. Specifically, for two or three years starting around 1984 when the first fully developed cultural responses to AIDS started appearing, melodrama was the principal vehicle in independent gay male fiction in film and video (and theatre as well, though that is beyond my territory for today) for our dealing culturally with the trauma, fear, bereavement and sacrifice that AIDS has occasioned in our community.

Melodrama is the genre that popular culture has traditionally drawn on to work out the strains of the nuclear family under the patriarchy. This form that evolved for the orchestration and resolution of the conflicts of the emotional sphere and the domestic realm, constructed on the dynamics of hopeless passion and inevitable societal repression, undeserved suffering and impossible choices, has historically had special contextual relevance for the women's audience. The melodrama -- the woman's film, the weepie, the tear-

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*question of  
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jerker, the soap opera -- has been traditionally opposed to the male genres of effective action and rationality in the outside world, from the western to the whodunit, and, until the feminist renovation of the discipline of film studies, was unjustly stigmatized by film historians for this reason. Gay critics have often followed this pattern, batting about terms like "sentimental", "maudlin", and "Rodgers-and-Hammerstein" to dismiss one of the special if not essential forms of gay popular culture. They follow, as Richard Dyer has pointed out, our culture's putdown of forms too closely allied to bodily responses, like horror, arousal, belly-laughs and weeping.

The 1984-86 cycle of film and video melodramas is no doubt familiar to this audience: William Hoffman's AS IS, adapted in 1986 by Home Box Office for pay-TV and the home video market; the two New York indie feature films, Arthur Bressan's BUDDIES (1985) and Bill Sherwood's PARTING GLANCES (1986); Stewart Main and Peter Wells' New Zealand television film A DEATH IN THE FAMILY (1986); to this list I would like to add two safe sex porno-melodramas which express a real continuity with the legit works, INEVITABLE LOVE (1985), produced within the sex video milieu and directed by a man named "Mach", who I am told is a prolific writer of erotic fiction; and CHANCE OF A LIFETIME (1985), produced by the Gay Men's Health Crisis (I am speaking primarily of the third episode "Hank and Jerry").\* These works remind us, as has often been argued, that the melodrama has had a privileged relationship with gay men as well as with women, both as audience and as producers, situated as we are,

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\*The new French film ENCORE may also be added to this list, but I will not come back to it since I have not ascertained its cultural context and cannot say whether director Paul Vecchiali is merchandising AIDS to the dominant culture as yet another morbid metaphor or whether this problematical and disturbing utterance can be situated within the gay community; outside the purview of my audio-visual corpus, Larry Kramer's theatrical play, THE NORMAL HEART, it may be noted, also has a strong melodramatic line, involving a traditional teeter-totter between the demands of love and vocation, and culminating in a deathbed marriage ceremony).

like women, if not outside patriarchal power, in ambiguous and contradictory relationship to it. It is not surprising that the community that enshrined CAMILLE, DARK VICTORY, BRIEF ENCOUNTER and A STAR IS BORN in the gay pantheon (and incidentally made those films as well) should have confirmed the melodrama as the key gay film genre of the period between Stonewall and the Epidemic: think of A VERY NATURAL THING, SUNDAY BLOODY SUNDAY, FOX AND HIS FRIENDS, THE CONSEQUENCE, MAKING LOVE and THE TIMES OF HARVEY MILK. The pattern continues with films like MAURICE, situated outside of the AIDS problematic (inasmuch as that is possible). \* As the epidemic entrenched itself, it was no accident I'm sure that one of the first major documentary feature on AIDS, Nick Sheehan's NO SAD SONGS (Toronto, 1985) -- a portrait of a man with AIDS taking leave of lover and family -- echoed in its title NO SAD SONGS FOR ME, a 1950 Hollywood melodrama in which a terminally ill Margaret Sullavan prepares her children and husband to go on without her. The melodramas PARTING GLANCES, CHANCE OF A LIFETIME, and INEVITABLE LOVE all briefly play with male action genre material in the form of brief fantasy interludes (cowboys, Indians, G.I.'s and jocks), but the effect is to accentuate all the more their hasty return to the vale of kisses and tears, their proper genre home. The melodrama became the first and foremost fictional form for independent filmmakers addressing the health crisis within a popular constituency in the mid-eighties.

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\*Mark Finch has commented on the melodramatic affinity of MAURICE in a rather acerbic broadside, but it is a film that I am not ashamed to admire. It belongs to an impulse towards literary adaptations from the preAIDS universe that admittedly signifies in some ways an escape from the harsh present, but has importance in terms of a laudable popular impulse towards restoring gay historical memory, its Masterpiece Theatre class aura notwithstanding.

\*\* For this reason I do not consider such made-for-television melodramas as AN EARLY FROST, regardless of how much gay input may have been present, since their emphasis on the heterosexual point of view moves this work over into the problematic of media representation of AIDS, a topic that is currently receiving the lion's share of gay cultural analysis.



My emphasis in drawing up the list of AIDS melodramas is of course on *self-representation*, gay men's images of ourselves.\*\* My corpus presumes by and large, for better or worse, the context of independent cinema (the examples of the New Zealand television film *DEATH* and HBO's adaptation of *AS IS* both confirm the continuing sad necessity of our reliance on gay-controlled independent media for our representation of our lives. Although in both cases, the gay point of view is maintained and gay input is determining, material relating to the gay community's political response to the crisis was deleted along the road to broadcast).

For independent gay artists to elicit tears as a response to the crisis is a worthy aesthetic strategy, especially when the tears are accompanied by the political lucidity that is also a feature of these films (to varying degrees it can of course be argued), and perhaps most important of all, when the tears are accompanied, as I would like to demonstrate in this paper, by other bodily secretions.

Secretions and sexuality are in fact at the centre of the discourse of the AIDS melodramas, and this I would argue is one of their great merits. The framework of sexual desire and love is so essential to the generic energy of these works that they should perhaps be categorized more precisely in term of a sub-branch, the romantic melodrama. That is, the melodrama where the problematic is not so much the crisis within the family, the nuclear family or the alternative surrogate family, as the impediments to the founding of the family itself. The independent gay filmmakers who produced the collective articulation of caution, mourning and consolation constituted by the melodrama cycle, have insisted on affirmative representations of our sexuality, on its celebration. In fact they organize the dramatic structure of the works around moments of sexual union and release. As *BUDDIES*'s person-with-AIDS hero

films, his conception as an active sexual agent, constitutes a defiant articulation of desire and sexual identity in the face of the stereotypes, the taboos and the death we know so well. It is also a gesture towards incorporating the point of view of the character into the discourse of AIDS, a reversal of the process of silencing, inoculation and ridicule, that have occulted the reality of these figures. <sup>in the media</sup> The person with AIDS is shown not only as sexual but also in several instances as downright sexy.

Characters peripheral to the key person with Aids participate in this sustenance of an erotic narrative universe. The buddy protagonist of BUDDIES is seen more often in his underwear in the single film than Clara Bow was in her entire career, participating in an idealized and fulfilled relationship with his lover as well as in his increasingly sexualized ministry to Robert. In DEATH also, though less explicit, a diffuse sexual camaraderie is seen as the cement holding together the group of gay male mourners. As for the safer-sex films, needless to say, they do not hesitate to follow the prescriptions of the porno genre, investing every character, line and situation with an overstated sexual potential.

The transformational operation of sexual exchange attains a particular complexity in BUDDIES through an iconographic <sup>opposition</sup> dialectic of "before" and "after", images of the previously healthy character with AIDS being inserted into the unfolding of the narrative. This is true also of Stash Kybaratas's admirable 1987 video DANNY, and of course of the majority of the PWA documentaries. Unfortunately it is equally a gruesome feature of mainstream media representation of AIDS, as Simon Watney and Stuart Marshall have pointed out, the foundation of the medical pornography of the doomed homosexual and deserving victim. Bressan's orchestration of the structure, relying on both stills and home-movie images of Robert's sunny California past as a countercultural beach hunk, evokes a sexual history in the company of previous lovers that

occasions no regrets, no retroactive dynamics of inevitability or morality. It is a past to be celebrated, not to be paid for. As buddy David's personal and sexual commitment to Robert grows, he begins to inhabit that flashback past; fantasizing himself as Robert's beach companion, he begins to claim it as part of his own sexual identity. His idealized and never seen lover accepts this sharing of his lover's erotic energy with a third man who is nevertheless not felt as a rival. A further dimension is added during Robert's climactic scene of sexual re-affirmation: as he masturbates he is watching on the VCR that David has brought him the 1974 porno film *PASSING STRANGERS* by none other than Arthur Bressan. A private self-referential conceit no doubt, but in retrospect moving beyond words as the late artist's incorporation of *his* own past, his sexual and artistic history, even his testament, into the text. But even for the spectator unaware of this poignant extra-filmic significance, the short clip connotes *our* history through the performers' rippling hippy haircuts and their aura of San Francisco and gay liberation, a utopian vision of sexuality reclaimed and restored from the past. It is a kind of affirmation of our cultural heritage of eroticism, epidemic or no, and an exploration of the erotic component of individual and collective memory. The individual home movie becomes paired with this collective home-movie and the gay liberationist heritage is conjured up to bolster us in the midst of crisis.

In contrast, *PARTING GLANCES*, a film unanimously acclaimed on its release, now seems to offer by and large a sexual text that is somewhat less affirmative of gay sexuality than may have at first appeared. Here sexuality seems to be less transformational in both its personal and dramatic operation than a dramatic pretext and a psychic plateau to be left behind. The main protagonist, Michael, is seen emerging from a lover relationship in which sex



has a teasing, coercive quality. The melodramatic transformation that occurs is not the renewal of this relationship -- though the open ending does not rule out this possibility -- but the strengthening of his relationship with Nick, his AIDS-stricken buddy, a character for whom he has always had an unacknowledged and unrequited love deeper even than his sexual love for the hunky heel he lives with. <sup>sort of like Scarlett O'Hara for Ashley Wilkes</sup> His relationship with Nick, like the relationship of Bressan's BUDDIES, grows and deepens, evolving from adolescent arm-wrestling to cathartic dish-smashing, platonic embraces and visions of open-ended voyages, but it never becomes sexual in the genital sense. Though Nick maintains a kind of gaunt rock star sexual glamour in the present (he admits to his buddy that he's a thrice-daily masturbator), and a kind of punkish friskiness in the fantasy sequences, sexual exchange seems to be out of the question. PARTING GLANCES, otherwise abounding in deceitful or perverse heterosexual relationships and unconsummated gay flirtations, ultimately articulates an attitude towards sexuality that is ambiguous at the very best and at worst symptomatic of the cynical distrust of sexuality that has been engendered by the health crisis.

Another recent gay melodrama with a not dissimilar pattern of the abandonment of traitorous and illusory sexual passion in favour of a platonic friendship is Dick Benner's <sup>Canadian sequel (1986).</sup> TOO OUTRAGEOUS. Though AIDS is a minor theme in this film, Benner's profound and unresolved AIDS scars are less smoothly camouflaged than in the New York equivalent: an appealing secondary character suddenly starts coughing and is given first the scriptwriter's trapdoor treatment, then is over-motivated retroactively through misleading and didactic fast-talking. AS IS gives occasional evidence of a similar disturbance, though it is ultimately patched over. <sup>AS IS, W</sup> In addition to the symptomatic connotations of the first lovemaking scene privileged as the occasion for the discovery of the lesion, other aspects contribute to an undermining of the positive vision of

sexuality that Hoffman may have been attempting. One scene offers an uncompassionate satire of a pickup in a leather bar, retained from the play even as the health crisis hotline scene was dropped. The secondary characterization of Chet, the most recent lover of the character with AIDS, is especially problematical: the only figure in the work constructed in terms of conventional erotic codes of nudity, he is seen splitting up the originally happy couple, and deserting his new lover after the diagnosis; then he himself gets the AIDS trapdoor treatment in the next act, implicated by simple inference as the adulterous source of the hero's infection.

INEVITABLE LOVE, one of the two safer-sex videos that are part of this melodrama corpus, is successful in almost entirely avoiding the naming of AIDS (there is a single reference).<sup>\*</sup> Nevertheless, AIDS is a structuring absence, accentuated by the conspicuous emphasis on safer sex and condoms, and the occasional passing lecture on condom use. It deploys very much the same transformational structure of sexual meanings and positive perspective of sexuality as BUDDIES, and CHANCE. Two closeted roommates, unaware of each other's love, must suffer an ordeal of separation and bad sex (safe and hot, but bad) before finally being reunited, sexually this time, with the line "Forget about the past". The melodrama of unspoken passion has always been a

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<sup>\*</sup>There is no space here for a tirade about the thriving porno industry's avoidance of the epidemic (except for a few exemplary figures like Richard Locke). It's unfathomable to me why there has been so little debate about the industry's utter bad faith in its masking of whatever safe sex the performers are fortunate enough to be allowed to practise on the set, and above all in its abundant glamourization of risk behaviors. Apart from perfunctory printed guidelines scrolling here and there, and some producers' self-righteously pronounced avoidance of internal ejaculation (when did the come-shot trade ever shown internal ejaculation?), the industry's culpability in this matter is a baldly stated matter of record. Nor is there space to savour the irony that our arguments about the difference between consumer fantasy and the politics of sexual practices, raised in the porn and censorship wars of the early eighties, are now coming back to haunt those of us who are very disturbed about the foot-dragging of the porno sector.)



basic formula for the porno industry, with NAVY BLUE, a seventies classic, providing the basic plot formula for this variation that substitutes college jocks for sailors. The final sex scene risks being anticlimactic, given the intensity of the various "ordeals" and adventures along the road to the lovers' reunion. The editor comes to the rescue with a interpolated flashback of the lovers' original crotch-grabbing wrestling scene from their innocent sublimated past. The effect, in its way, lacks neither erotic power not melodramatic transcendence. *delightfully  
frustrating but moving.*

**EXCERPT: INEVITABLE LOVE, reunion til end, c. 9 min., stop after wrestling intercutting and some sex**

→ A DEATH IN THE FAMILY is the only one of the AIDS melodramas to confront through full dramatic representation the death of a major character with AIDS. Surrounded by his alternative gay "family", Andrew lapses in and out of consciousness as the last sixteen days of his life inexorably parade by. The transformational sexual structure of the other melodramas is nevertheless still recognizable, now however altered by the circumstances of the plot. After his death the ritual of sexual renewal is taken over by two of the mourners who have been brought together by the death. The two men, who have been seen exchanging meaningful looks throughout, are shown kissing, tentatively at first, as much out of mutual consolation as desire, and their eventual sexual union is only implied.

**EXCERPT: DEATH IN THE FAMILY, death scene until end of funeral, c. 4 min**

As for the PWA, like the characters with AIDS in BUDDIES, AS IS and PARTING GLANCES, Andrew's moribund figure is still eroticized in his way. I am speaking on one level of a certain element in his visual conception which consigns an almost ethereal beauty to his face, body and limbs.\* At the same time, through the mise-en-scene of non-verbal communication, Andrew's body is constantly maintained in sensuous tactile contact with his grieving friends.

Comfort is implicitly shared back and forth through caresses, touching, looks and smiles. The bathing scene, a traditional format for the erotic representation of the body, is particularly eloquent in this regard, luxuriating in the textures of skin and fabric, in the light reflected in the movement of water, and above all in the simple child-like pleasure registered on Andrew's face. At another point, Andrew plays with his doctor's baby, enriching the atmosphere of pansexuality (as well as inserting an important didactic message about contagion). Even after his death, Andrew's corpse continues to be an erotic icon, like the bodies of martyrs in the Baroque painterly traditions evoked continuously by the filmmakers' composition and lighting; his body continues to be touched, even caressed, with the classical imagery of candle flame, flowers and sky now adding to its sensuous luminosity.

It is Well's and Main's insight into the erotic nature of comforting and receiving comfort, of the human body even in abject humiliation and pain, of the sexual dimensions of the act of mourning itself, whether solitary or communal, that particularly distinguishes *A DEATH IN THE FAMILY*. This insight is present in a more diffuse way in all of the melodramas<sup>pe</sup> under discussion, by the very nature of their generic construction and address: all melodramas invoke after all the contradictory beauty and pleasure of suffering. In *DANNY*, the videomaker's grieving voice makes this point explicitly as his camera lovingly scans in tight closeup both of Danny's bodies, before and after AIDS-related chemotherapy. Eroticism is clearly a potentially creative phase in the trajectory of the responses to dying and death, an embodiment of acceptance and affirmation of the body. As Michael Bronski has argued in his

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\*Of course, this has left the film open to criticism that the ugliness of AIDS deaths is thereby trivialized, a criticism that if valid is equally applicable to all the works under study. However, unless we insist that fiction's aims are to provide medical documentation, rather than to operate mythically on some level, this criticism does not invalidate the films.



moving personal reflection on this unconventional association of sex and death, ("Death, AIDS and the Transfiguration of Grief: Thoughts on the Sexualization of Mourning."), eroticism is, for the mourner, as in this context for the artist and the spectator, "a constructive way to regain a sense of self and strength in a world that is too difficult to bear at the moment. . . the primal act of sex seems to mock death by reaffirming the feeling of being alive."

### **POSSIBLE ENDING**

It remains to inventory and reflect on the presence of the discourse of safer sex both within the framework of the melodrama genre, and in reference to the political imperative of the films' context. The legit films (i.e. non explicit ones) tend to privilege relationship sex, as the current fashion and the generic demands of the melodrama would have it, though they do not close the door on what the lovers of AS IS nostalgically call "non-committed sex." Masturbation is acknowledged to exist and to be a valid dimension of the sexual spectrum, but ultimately the couple is the locus of the positive incarnations of sexuality that are envisioned. Except for BUDDIES, none of the legit films depict orgasm directly, and this may testify to an evolving conception of sexual behaviour in our community, the dispersal of the cult of come. The safer-sex videos support this hypothesis, not only through the almost total banishment of the closeup "money shot" from the iconographic register, (the de-fetishization of the infested discharge;) but also in the opening up of the spectrum of sexual behaviours. Of particular interest is the legitimization of a sexual union in which one or even both partners may not come. Otherwise heavy scrotal licking and on-the-belly and between-the-legs frottage are on the ascendent. Condoms are surprisingly rare, except in INEVITABLE LOVE, where they are everyone's "favorite thing to wear" (to quote John

Greyson's safer sex rock video). CHANCE eschews anal fucking, even protected, but INEVITABLE goes all out. It is ironic that kissing rather than fucking remains the litmus test of sexual politics, as it was before AIDS: its absence from AS IS calls into question the good faith of the Home Box Office apparatus and the good faith of the straight-identified actor in the lead role, just as its delirious presence throughout the safer sex films and PARTING GLANCES, and of course its climactic presence in DEATH, MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE, and even KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN indicates a new maturity in our sexual self-representation. Kissing, with the romantic even transcendental semiotic baggage it has acquired in our culture, returns us to the subject of melodrama, where the nitty gritty of condoms unfortunately seems ill-suited to the spiritual union of two hearts. Did Rock Hudson wear a condom in MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION? *\*Patton - depiction of orgasm and orgasm*

The mechanics of love are thus evolving in the domain of our self-representation. Our melodramas have reflected this to a greater or lesser degree. Perhaps more important, their resurgence in the mid-eighties may have helped keep in view a certain continuity of cultural tradition and sex-positive erotic energy to help us through the crisis, deploying the "positive image" aesthetics of seventies gay lib cinema to help us in the eighties communally mourn the dead and comfort the living and imagine the future. None of the films I have discussed are without ideological tensions and elisions, yet they have participated in a kind of cultural healing process within the framework of our popular culture. In so far as they have succeeded in flowing through the channels of ghetto distribution, they have been at the centre of our evolving political and cultural consciousness.

Nevertheless, the melodrama cycle may now have spent most of its force and its mythic concerns may be resurfacing within other generic forms. A case in point is Rosa von Praunheim's A VIRUS RESPECTS NO MORALS, a film which

*seventies Johnny come-lately fastidious ideological scrutiny.*



replaces the aesthetics of comfort and eroticism with one of assault. Towards the end of the film, the principal character (played by the filmmaker himself), an unscrupulous gay sauna owner who thinks safe sex is bad for business, is wandering amid the flower beds of a cemetery, thinking about the epidemic, his sex life, and a departed employee, organ music sobbing in the background. "This disease makes me horny. . .," goes his voice-over soliloquy, "Sex is life and I believe in life."

**EXCERPT: VIRUS, graveyard sequence til end of hospital syringe-stabbing, 3 min** ✓

One might think out of context that this is a conventional scene of the melodrama genre: he could have been Shirley Maclaine at the end of *TERMS OF ENDEARMENT*. Yet its context in the film disallows this reading: elsewhere, this "black comedy", as it is tactfully labelled by distributors to ward off audience uprisings, is a bleak nihilistic dystopian farce in which every possible implicated constituency is scornfully satirized -- medical researchers, health care workers, tabloid reporters, people with AIDS, AIDS activists, Christian celibates, gay profiteers, AIDS therapists, bureaucrats, mothers, widows and babies -- everyone gets Aids and ends up in a concentration camp called "Hellgayland". In short, *VIRUS* is an anti-melodrama. A long series of melodramatic situations is shredded with gleeful Brechtian savagery: in addition to the hospital-bed suffering exploding in a murderous assault with an infected syringe, there are also tearful reunions with a mother figure that degenerate into raucous screaming matches, a poignant diagnosis that quickly slides into slapstick. *J* What about sex? Sex is a half-hearted ritual in an empty sauna littered with shit, in a cruising park where condoms dangle from the trees and used kleenexes cover the earth. It is hesitatingly approached by naked young innocents wandering around at the end of the world. Sex becomes what Arthur Kroker would call cynical and parodic, panic sex, sex

without secretions by bodies in ruins at the postmodern end of the simulacrum of the world, the pleasure of catastrophe. Eroticism is as impossible as is melodrama itself. Is von Praunheim engaged in a clever political tactic for stirring up our profoundest cultural response by turning the melodrama upside down, or is his work simply a way of dealing culturally with the epidemic, an artistic embodiment of the stage of mingled rage, paranoia and suicidal self-pity that many of us have gone through or shall go through. It is only our knowledge of the context of A VIRUS RESPECTS NO MORALS and its use within its author's tireless AIDS activism in Germany that allows us to infer some level of sincere commitment from the graveyard credo. It is interesting that the film, despite a few enthusiastic reviews, has to my knowledge not really struck a responsive chord outside of Germany.

The anti-melodrama is not the only alternative: videomaker John Greyson has evolved from a 1985 coming out melodrama, THE JUNGLE BOY, to a new feature film URINAL, a political sci-fi parlour mystery, as playfully sex-positive and studiously camp as it is lucid and angry, situating the health crisis on a spectrum of other gay political issues and beyond. This hopefully may be part of a larger pattern. Will the gay melodrama expand its role of conscience, consolation, pillowbook and elegy, cross-fertilizing with those other resilient cultural forms of our heritage, comedy and camp, as they adjust to the imperatives of the current political emergency? Can the ironic froth of the camp response and the visionary anger of the activist documentaries absorb the depth of feeling and affirmation of desire that the AIDS melodramas articulated? Should we ask for both the moon and the stars?

*Footnote: re misreading advocacy as unproblematical  
return to melodrama.*